



*Peruse this presentation and think about the examples given. You need to write some notes (terms & definitions) AND label the examples on your handout for later reference.*

# Figurative Language

a.k.a. “Figures of Speech”



# Figurative Language

## A General Definition

- Figurative language is NOT literal language, not logical.
- If a statement is LITERALLY true, it cannot be a figure of speech.
- Figures of speech engage readers, inviting them to play along, to imagine.



# Figurative Language

## Common Purposes

- “(Jim Casy’s) was a long head, bony, tight of skin and set on a neck as stringy and muscular as a celery stalk.” John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*
  - IMAGERY
    - Figurative language creates pictures, smells, sights, sounds, etc.
  - PLEASURE/POETIC TEXTURE
    - It’s fun!
    - “First-rate literature delights and instructs.”  
-- WH Auden

*Why not just say his neck is muscular and stringy?*

# CHECK-UP

## PURPOSE REVIEW

### Flower in Crannied Wall

Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand  
Little flower-- but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.

### To See A World in a Grain of Sand

To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.

*What IS the figurative language in these poems (both by William Blake)?  
In other words, what is imaginative, NOT literal in the poems?  
What imagery does it create?  
How is it pleasurable (more fun than simply teaching the lesson)? What is the  
lesson in each poem? How does the figurative language emphasize it?*



# Figurative Language

## Common Purposes

- “flourlike dust” John Steinbeck *The Grapes of Wrath*
  - CLARIFICATION
    - Figurative Language can show the reader exactly what the writer means; it can also explain unusual, new, or unfamiliar qualities.
- “[Tom, confronting the man who drives the truck] licked his lips like a dog, two licks, one in each direction from the middle.”
  - TONE
    - An image carries an attitude! Tom is hungry, animalistic, ready to fight when he feels cornered.

*Note how comparing the dust to FLOUR changes everything: how easy is it to clean up spilled flour? Is the dust you clean off of your furniture like flour? How would you like to be buried in flour? Are you suffocating and gagging yet? Yuck!*



# Figurative Language

## SIMILE

- a comparison of two dissimilar things using “like” or “as”
  - similes are polite and unassuming
  - from “A Red, Red Rose” by Robert Burns:
    - O my luve’s like a red, red rose  
That’s newly sprung in June;  
O my luve’s like the melodie  
That’s sweetly played in tune

*How does this particular comparison affect the tone of the poem? What kind of love is this if it is like a red rose (compared to say, an orange lily)? Why a rose newly sprung in June (compared to say, in the full glorious bloom of July)? What does it say about his love that it’s like a sweet, tuneful melody (compared to say, a booming chorus or full symphony)?*



# Figurative Language

## METAPHOR

- A direct comparison of two dissimilar things
  - Metaphor is stronger, more controlling and forceful
  - “The Drum” by Nikki Giovanni
    - daddy says the world is  
a drum tight and hard  
and i told him  
i'm gonna beat  
out my own rhythm
- “With rare ingenuity, Aimee kept the Ferris wheels and the merry-go-round of religion going night and day.” Carey McWilliams
- [Huey Long] designated his old benefactor, O.K. Allen of Winnfield, as the apostolic choice for the next full term.” Hodding Carter

*What do these metaphors suggest? What attitudes or associations do they have? What does ‘daddy’ mean about the world? What does the author feel about religion if there are Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds in it? What is the significance of Long’s choice if it is apostolic?*





# CHECK-UP

## Metaphor vs. Simile

“Silos” by Rita Dove

Like martial swans in spring paraded against the city sky’s shabby blue, they were always too white and suddenly there.

They were never fingers, never xylophones, although once a stranger said they put him in mind of Pan’s pipes and all the lost songs of Greece. But to the townspeople they were like cigarettes, the smell chewy and bitter like a field shorn of milkweed, or beer brewing, or a fingernail scorched over a flame.

No, no, exclaimed the children. They’re a fresh packet of chalk, dreading the math work.

They were masculine toys. They were tall wishes. They were the ribs of the modern world.

*Can you spot the metaphors? The similes? What do they suggest?*





# Figurative Language

## PERSONIFICATION

- Applying human traits to non-human (usually inanimate) objects
  - Using **verbs**: the trees gossip in high whispers through the evening
  - Using the **third-person singular pronouns**, he, and she: By October, the oak had only half of her russet leaves . . .
  - Using **adjectives and participles**: the shivering autumn trees looked surprised to find themselves naked so soon
  - Using **nouns**: the trees, a fierce-looking defensive line, made the girl hesitate to continue
  - **Assigning body parts**: the trees stretched their bony knuckles toward the sky
- Personification is playful, imaginative.
- Personification can suggest PATHETIC FALLACY



# PERSONIFICATION, cont.

Apparently with no surprise  
to any happy Flower  
The Frost beheads it at its play--  
In accidental power  
The blonde Assassin passes on--  
The Sun proceeds unmoved  
To measure off another Day  
For an approving God

-- Emily Dickinson

PURPOSE?

*How does personification in this poem show attitude/tone? What is the poet suggesting about the Frost? The Sun? What, metaphorically, could the flower, the frost, the sun represent?*



# Figurative Language

## APOSTROPHE

(uh-PAW-stra-fee)

- Speech delivered to an inanimate object or an absent person
  - (a type of personification)
  - Apostrophe is very dramatic!
  - “Oh, happy dagger!” (Shakespeare)
  - “Bright Star, would that I were steadfast as thou art!” (John Keats)
  - from “Question” by May Swenson
    - Body my house
    - my horse my hound
    - What will I do
    - When you are fallen
  
    - Where will I sleep
    - How will I ride
    - What will I hunt

*Have some fun thinking about the metaphors in this poem: how is your body your house? your horse? your hound? What is the big “question” this poem is really asking?*



# Figurative Language

## HYPERBOLE

(hi-PER-bo-lee)

- A deliberate misrepresentation of something as more than it really is (an exaggeration)
  - Hyperbole is always verbal irony (a discrepancy between what you say and what you mean), so it has a playful or dramatic effect.
  - from “Persimmons” by Li-Young Lee
    - My mother said every persimmon has a sun  
inside, something golden, glowing,  
warm as my face.

Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper  
forgotten and not yet ripe.

I took them and set them both on my bedroom windowsill,  
where each morning a cardinal  
sang. The sun, the sun.

*What is exaggerated in  
these stanzas? Why?*

# Figurative Language

## UNDERSTATEMENT

- A deliberate misrepresentation of something as less than it is.
  - Although by definition, understatement is the opposite of hyperbole, the effect is really the same!
  - from “Persimmons” by Li-Young Lee  
Other words  
that got me into trouble were  
fight and fright, wren and yarn  
Fight was what I did when I was frightened,  
fright was what I felt when I was fighting
- From *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver: "We aimed for no more than to have dominion over every creature that moved upon the earth."

*Do you see the hyperbole? How does it feel?*



# Figurative Language

## LITOTES

(LI-toe-teez)

- verbal irony created by emphasizing a positive by doubling a negative
  - (a type of understatement-- sometimes used as a synonym for understatement in general)
  - Example: your friend hits a hole-in-one and you say “Not bad.”
  - Example: your friend earns 20% on an exam and you explain “at least you didn’t throw off the grading curve.”

*Sarcasm is another kind of verbal irony. That’s why these particular figures of speech feel so sassy. Guess what? By definition sarcasm is mean-spirited, even if you say you’re “just playing”... think about that ...*





# Figurative Language

## METONYMY

(meh-TAWN-uh-mee)

- Substituting something closely associated with what you really mean instead of naming it exactly
  - Common in clichés: word from the White House, the Crown was handed down to her son, from the cradle to the grave, use your brain
  - “The pen is mightier than the sword.”
  - “The birds have started singing in the valley. Their February squawks and naked chirps are fully fledged now, and long lyrics fly in the air.” Annie Dillard
  - PURPOSE: metonymy allows a writer to create a more exact, specific, CONCRETE! image.



# Figurative Language

## SYNECDOCHE

(si-NECK-duh-kee)

- Naming a part of something instead of the name of the whole . . .
  - Can you lend me a hand? Did you see his new wheels? I need your muscles for a minute. Give me a second! Let's go get a bite to eat.
- Or when the whole of something is used instead of the name of part.
  - The police department arrived at midnight.
  - The US Marines delivered food and transportation to Southeast Asia.
  - The IRS called about last year's deductions.
  - The University of Utah went unbeaten this season.
- Similar in purpose to metonymy-- sometimes called metonymy!



# Figurative Language

## OXYMORON

- collocation = group of words considered one unit of meaning
- A short collocation (usually two-words) where the modifier(s) logically contradicts the noun
  - Common examples: jumbo shrimp, easy problem, perfect mistake, happy accident, serious joke
  - Lord Roseberry: “a practical mystic”
  - John Keats: “delicious diligent indolence”
- Effect is playful, thought-provoking



# Figurative Language

## PARADOX

- *FYI: (logical paradox) a syllogism contradictory in its premises so as to create an impossible conclusion. This is NOT the type we refer to when we discuss figurative language. It's a mind trick, not a figure of speech.*
- **\*\* (rhetorical paradox) a longer, uncondensed contradiction that, upon thought, is true despite its illogic**
- Some examples from the master, Oscar Wilde:
  - A man can be happy with any woman as long as he does not love her.
  - I am not young enough to know everything.
  - I love acting. It is so much more real than life.
  - I can resist everything except temptation.
  - The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple.
  - The play was a great success, but the audience was a disaster.
  - Thirty-five is a very attractive age. London society is full of women of the highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years.

# OXYMORON vs. PARADOX

- “A yawn may be defined as a silent yell.” – G. K. Chesterton
- “His soul will never starve for exploits or excitement who is wise enough to be made a fool of.” – G. K. Chesterton
- From *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald
  - “Evidently it surprised her as much as it did me, for she yawned and with a series of rapid, deft movements stood up into the room.”
  - [she] stood at the head of the marble steps, leaning a little backward and looking with contemptuous interest down into the garden.
  - “And I like large parties. They’re so intimate. At small parties there isn’t any privacy.”

*Can you find them? Can you tell the difference? You know Gatsby. What pattern and/or meaning do you see in these examples?*

# Figurative Language

## PUN

(*paranomasia*)

- A word used in two or more senses OR a word used in a context that suggests a second term which sounds like it
- PURPOSE:
  - 1) for humor (although in writing from earlier centuries puns could have serious meanings),
  - 2) 2) to reveal unexpected connections
    - Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.
    - “A cannon-ball took off his legs, so he laid down his arms.” Thomas Hood
    - “During the two previous centuries musical styles went in one era and out of the other . . .” Frank Muir
- A not funny example from *Hamlet* (I.ii):

CLAUDIUS: ...But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—  
HAMLET: A little more than kin, and less than kind.  
CLAUDIUS: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?  
HAMLET: Not so my lord; I am too much i' the sun.





## PUN, cont.

A: I'm tired of blonde jokes. I'm blonde and I happen to be really smart!

B: Oh, yeah? What smart things do you know?

A: Well, I just learned all of the state capitals.

B: Really? Then what's the capital of Washington?

A: Duh! It's W!

“Even as a schoolboy poultry-raising was a study with me, and I may say without egotism that as early as the age of seventeen I was acquainted with all the best and speediest methods of raising chickens, from raising them off a roost by burning Lucifer matches under their noses, down to lifting them off a fence on a frosty night by insinuating a warm board under their feet.” Mark Twain

**RHETORICAL ANALYSIS HINT:** “A bad pun is regrettable. But a good pun-- one both clever and revealing-- is worth making.” Thomas Kane

# Figurative Language

## ZEUGMA

(ZOOG-ma)

- A type of pun involving a verb used with two or more objects, but with a different meaning
- “Joanna, pursued by the three monks, ran about the room, leaping over tables and chairs, sometimes throwing a dish or a scriptural maxim at her pursuers.” Laurence Durrell
- “Piano, n. A parlor utensil for subduing the impenitent visitor. It is operated by depressing the keys of the machine and the spirits of the audience.” Ambrose Bierce
- A zeugma is a very sophisticated and intricate figure of speech. If you see them, consider the topic, speaker, intended audience. They’re usually academic, stuffy, even highfalutin.



# Figurative Language

## SYNESTHESIA

(sin-us-THEE-zha)

(also spelled synaesthesia)

- Describing one sensory experience in terms used literally to describe another sense
  - Common uses (clichés): loud clothing, a velvet-voiced singer, a sweet sound, a sour face, a hot girl, a sharp reply, a smooth voice, a soft noise, a bitter comment, a cold look, a gravelly voice . . .
  - from “Façades”: “The enormous and gold-rayed rustling sun.” (Edith Sitwell)
  - from “Mandalay”: “An’ the dawn comes up like thunder” (Rudyard Kipling)
  - from “Silos”: smell chewy and bitter (Rita Dove)
  - From chapter three of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald:
    - Now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music
    - And floating in the Sound was a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, tinny drip of the banjos on the lawn



# Figurative Language

## ALLUSION

- a brief reference to a well-known person, place, passage, or happening
- Allusions especially affect TONE
  - “All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, “All intelligences awake with the morning.” Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise.”  
Henry David Thoreau (from Walden)
- Sometimes, as in Thoreau’s, the reference is explicit

Allusions broaden the appeal of a piece of writing to a more sophisticated audience. Shakespeare for example, would use allusions to reach the higher class men who attended his plays and would feel fancy for recognizing. Then he threw in dirty puns and slapstick action for the “groundlings” who were also there! If you know your Hindu scripture and Greek mythology, for example, the quote above reveals more to you. Congratulations, smarty pants.

# Figurative Language

## ALLUSION

- Sometimes the reference is more subtle . . .  
“ . . . to paraphrase the idle legend of Peter Piper, who had never found his way into their nursery, If the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at more than this, what was it for good gracious goodness’ sake that the greedy little Gradgrinds grasped at?”  
Charles Dickens (in *Hard Times*)  
*Recognize the allusion? PS: don’t have the patience for a Dickens novel? Try this one!*
- And other times it’s only noticeable to the careful, informed reader  
“I didn’t know whether I should appear before you-- there is a time to show and a time to hide; there is a time to speak, and also a time to be silent.”  
Norman O. Brown  
*How about this allusion?*
- From *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (chapter 6)  
The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father’s Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty.  
*What do these allusions suggest? (There are two) Foreshadow?....*